“Women are victims.”

“Men are protectors.”

“Women and children are one group. Women and children are innocent civilians.”

“Men are militants.”

These are some of the stereotypes that have seeped into our conversations and our expectations about peace and security issues. Intentional or not, we divide our understandings along the lines of biological sex—male and female, creating structures for our work that limit our understanding of reality and ignore sexual or gender identities that do not fit into that binary.

Disarmament, arms control, and international security, like other fields, are affected by patriarchy. Men—whether protectors or militants or both—hold more power, including over how we view women’s and others’ roles and behaviour.

Much of the discussion on weapons and international security spreads stereotypical—and false—gender ideas and constructions of men who are violent and powerful and women who are vulnerable and need to be protected. The civil society organisations that have signed onto this statement believe that we need to challenge these constructions and the conversations that build them. We need to change these constructions to further justice, participation, and influence, and because efficient disarmament policy must be anchored in experiences and realities of all and not just some.

Changing our discussion and constructions requires breaking down the binary of women as victims and men as militants and/or protectors. People can suffer disproportionate or differential impacts from the use or proliferation of weapons, inside or outside of armed conflict.

Men tend to make up the majority of direct victims of armed violence. Sometimes, they are targeted just for being men, as with the current practice in the use of armed drones. Meanwhile, women can face differing impacts from the use of weapons such as worsened social and political inequality and pressures from the increase in female-headed households; inequalities in access to survivor assistance; and higher risk of sexual violence, especially when they are displaced from their homes.

Women are the majority of victims of gender-based violence, which is directed at a person because of their sex. Women have been raped at gunpoint in the DRC, or stripped naked and forced to escort tanks in Syria. However, gender-based violence is also directed at persons because of their gender identity or sexual orientation, or perceived transgressions of gender norms. LGBTIQ people have been assaulted or killed with guns around the world, and continue to be victims of state sanctioned targeting in some parts of the world.

Women and girls can also be affected by militarism in unique ways. State and non-state armed forces alike have engaged in trafficking, sexual exploitation, and sexual violence in the communities in which they operate. The relationship between foreign military bases and sexual exploitation and abuse in the local communities is a long-established fact. From Okinawa to Djibouti City, the influx of soldiers from foreign countries brings with it brothels, forced prostitution, and rape.

But it is important to not just see women or LGBT communities as victims. Treating women as victims, and grouping them with children, facilitates their exclusion from participating in political or social roles with authority and responsibility for decision-making. It also impedes the establishment of systems or approaches that benefit from a gender perspective in seeking to prevent violence and conflict.

There is a stark disparity in the level and volume of participation of women, men, and others in disarmament and arms control discussions, negotiations, and processes. Recent research has shown that at any given intergovernmental meeting on disarmament, only about one quarter of participants are likely to be women and almost half of all delegations are likely to be composed entirely of men.
At the same time, the framing of men and boys as “potential” or actual militants entrenches a tendency to support “violent masculinities”—a social construction in which masculinity is linked with preparedness to use violence including military action and to wield weapons. Categorising women and children as innocent civilians leaves men out, limiting or even precluding their access to the protections afforded civilians or those concerned “innocent” in armed conflict or in relation to armed violence. Civilian status is determined by participation in armed conflict, not gender.

A more robust reflection of the relationship between weapons and gender-based violence, differential impacts of the use of weapons or of the arms trade on the sexes, and gendered aspects of armed conflict and armed violence are crucial to addressing the challenges associated with the proliferation and use of weapons in and out of conflict. Thus we recommend that:

1. **Gender-based violence be interpreted as violence based on socially constructed norms, perceptions, and power relations of gender.** This can indeed include violence against women. But it also includes attacks based on other norms and discrimination about gender and sexuality.

2. **Women must not be categorised as vulnerable or innocent victims, and harm specifically to women must be addressed not because it is worse than other forms of violence but because all violence should be prevented.** Instruments and initiatives should recognise the differential impacts of weapons use, trade, and proliferation on women and others without rendering them helpless victims that lack agency and without implying that harm to women makes the mechanism of harm worse.

3. **States, international organisations, and civil society groups must strengthen the collection and analysis of gender-, sex- and age-disaggregated data on the impact of weapons, including through the implementation of systematic casualty recording.** The motivation in documenting and highlighting differential impacts should be to ensure that women, specific groups of women, or other groups affected by gender discrimination receive adequate protection, care, rehabilitation, and participation in preventing and recovering from armed conflict and armed violence.

4. **Gender diversity in disarmament, non-proliferation, and arms control must promote the experiences and influence of all those not conforming to dominant gender or sexuality norms.** Armed violence also has differential impacts on LGBTQI people, which should be reflected in discussions about weapons, conflict, and violence. It should ensure that a range of perspectives is presented in discussions and negotiations, including critiques of dominant structural inequalities and normative framings. “Effective” participation of women and others creates space for alternative conceptions of security and focus on preventing armed conflict and armed violence rather than on responding to it with military force.

5. **Initiatives promoting gender diversity in any of the above should include an explicit critique of militarism and war, including of the patriarchal structures that sustain them.** Without a critique of the role that violent masculinities play in our work, we are held hostage by militarist states and military institutions.

6. **All treaties, resolutions, commitments, and declarations on the production, possession, transfer, proliferation, or use of weapons must have a gender perspective.** They need to take into account differential gendered impacts; gender diversity in the negotiation or elaboration of relevant instruments; and an analysis of the gendered dimensions of the challenges being confronted. Building on the precedent of the provision on gender-based violence in the Arms Trade Treaty, future disarmament treaties should include operative provisions regarding the gendered impact of violence.

7. **Similarly, instruments dealing with women, peace and security or women’s human rights must incorporate issues related to weapons, war, and violence.** They should promote disarmament and arms control as integral to enhancing women’s human rights, preventing GBV, and preventing and ending armed conflict and armed violence.
This statement was prepared by the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) and delivered by Ms. Ray Acheson, Director of the Reaching Critical Will programme of WILPF. The following civil society organisations endorse this statement:

Action on Armed Violence
Association for Aid and Relief, Japan (AAR Japan)
Bolivian Women’s Efforts
Colombian Campaign to Ban Landmines (Campaña Colombiana Contra Minas – CCCM)
Control Arms
International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA) Women’s Network
International Peace Bureau
International Peace Research Association
International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW)
Israeli Disarmament Movement
Mines Action Canada
Norwegian People’s Aid
Nuclear Age Peace Foundation
People for Nuclear Disarmament, Human Survival Project
PAX
Pax Christi Flanders
Pax Christi International
Peace Education-Miriam College
SEHLAC Network
Strategic Concept for the Removal of Arms and Proliferation (SCRAP)
WO-MEN
Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF)
World Council of Churches